A Third Book of
BRITISH BIRDS
and their nests

A LADYBIRD NATURE BOOK

by

BRIAN VESEY-FITZGERALD F.L.S.

Colour illustrations by

ROLAND GREEN M.B.O.U., F.R.S.A.

Hello, children! Thank you very much for all your letters. Well, here is a third book about British birds and their nests, and I hope you will like it as much as you did the other two.

This time, Roland Green, a very famous bird artist, has painted beautiful pictures of the birds I have written about. If you look at these carefully, you should easily recognise the birds when you see them.

All the birds in this book are common—though some are more common than others. However, to see one or two, you will have to visit places like the seashore or big ponds.

I have also tried to tell you where to look for their nests, because this is very good fun. If you find a nest, and of course you will, do be careful not to disturb it. It's the bird's home, remember!

I hope you have many happy days bird-watching.

Brian Vaughan Fitzgerald.

Series 536

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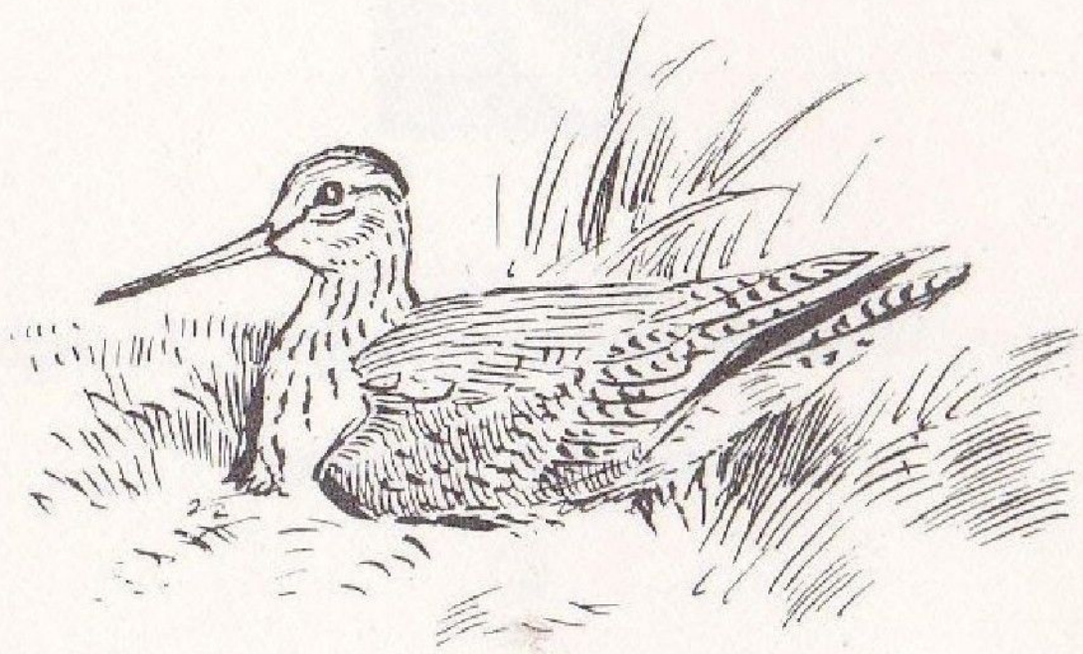
The Redshank

The Redshank is sometimes known as "The Warden of the Marshes". This indicates the kind of country in which Redshanks normally live, and also implies that they are very nervous and wide awake, warning all other birds around them with their high, musical whistle, as soon as a human being appears.

The Redshank is quite a small bird, only the size of a Thrush, but it has very long legs, spending a great deal of time wading in streams and ponds, or at the edge of the sea; and so it appears to look a much bigger bird than it is actually.

The nest is just a depression in the ground, sheltered by tall grasses or rushes.



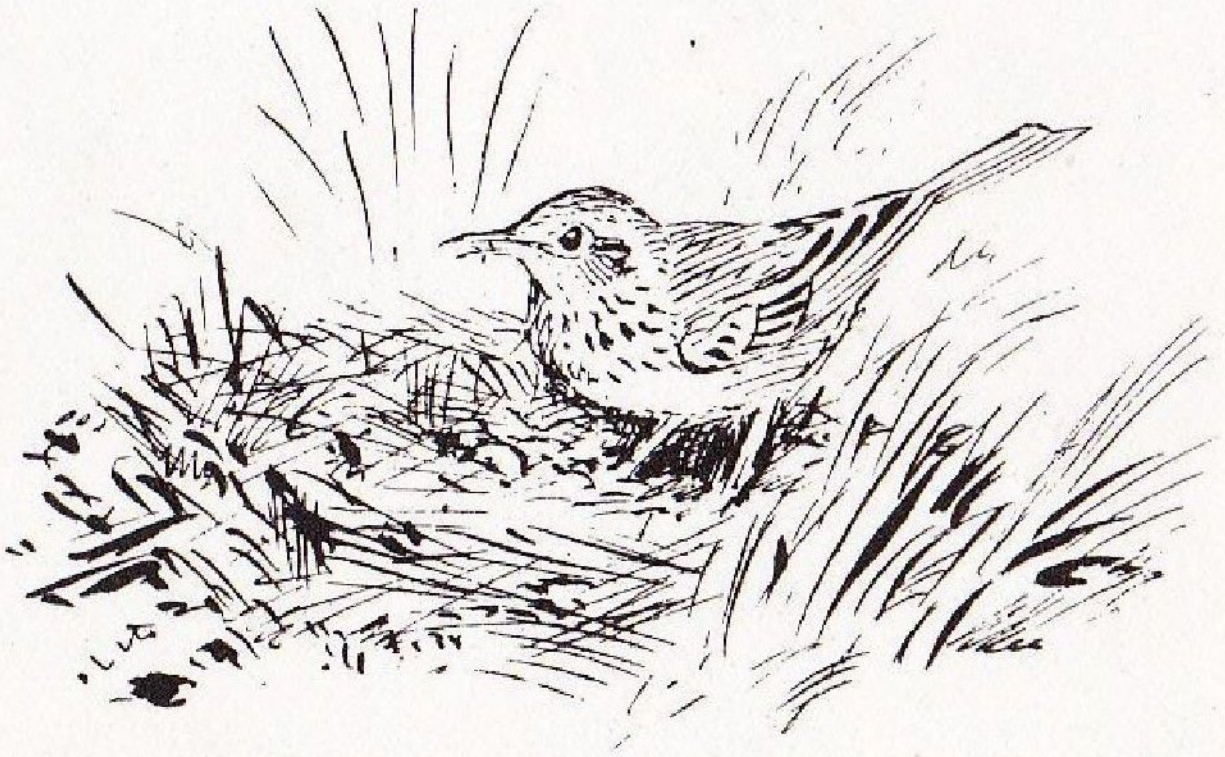
The Meadow Pipit

If you see a bird that looks like a small Skylark, then you can feel almost sure that you have seen a Meadow Pipit.

The Meadow Pipit, which is a very common bird, lives in the open country and sings in flight like the Skylark, but its song is quite different. Unlike the Skylark, however, the Meadow Pipit does not climb high into the sky, so it is really easy to tell the difference.

Meadow Pipits feed on insects and worms and so are very useful birds.

The nest is on the ground, and if you want to find a Cuckoo's egg, one of the best places to look is in a Meadow Pipit's nest.



The Sparrow-Hawk

The Sparrow-Hawk likes well-wooded country with farm lands and big gardens, although it sometimes hunts in town parks. It has a long tail, by which you can tell it from all other hawks. In fact, except that the Sparrow-Hawk flies very fast and close to the ground, the only bird you can mistake it for is the Cuckoo.

Sparrow-Hawks live almost entirely on small birds, which they catch in flight; but they also take the chicks of poultry and ducks. Because of this, every man's hand is against them. Even so, they are our most common hawks.

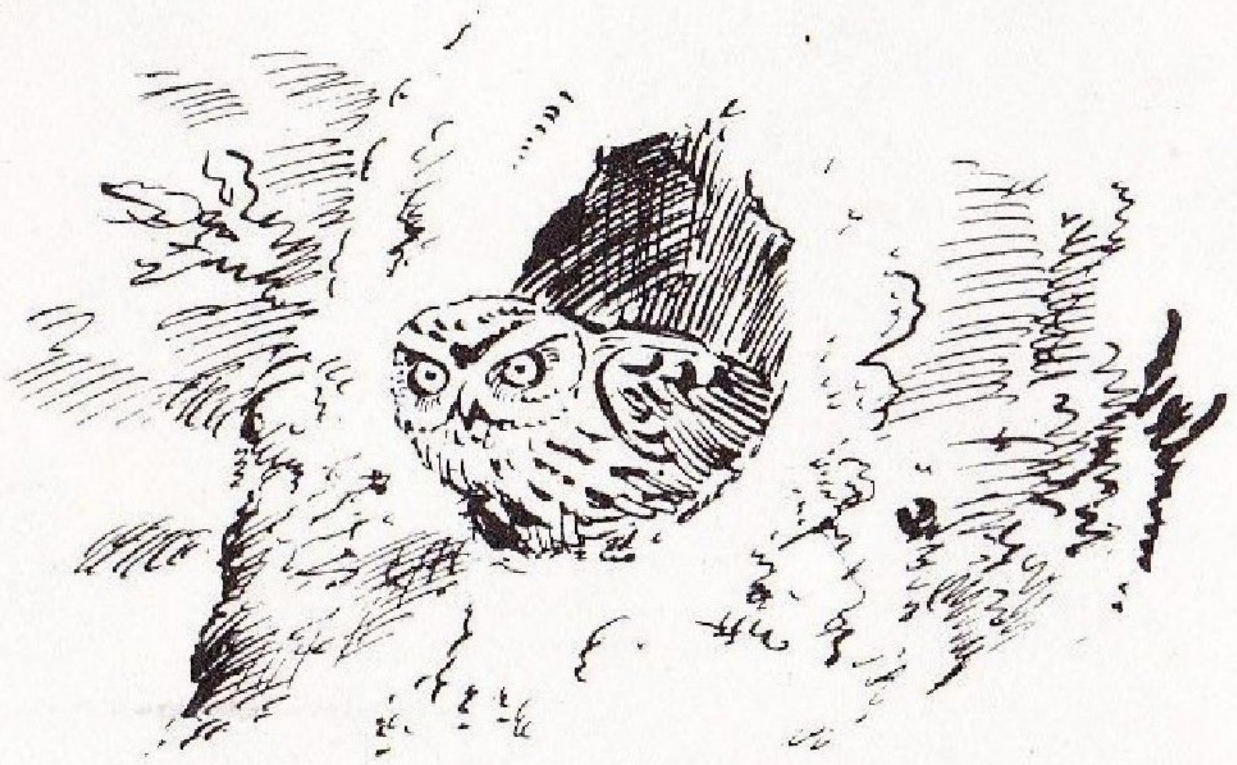
The big, bulky nest is usually built in the fork of a tree.

The Little Owl

The Little Owl really is a small bird, even smaller than a Blackbird. Unlike other owls, it is often seen about in broad daylight, though it prefers to hunt at twilight. Its cry is a long drawn-out mewing, rather like a cat's, only shriller.

When on the ground, the Little Owl does not hop, but runs quite fast. It is a fierce little bird, and eats mice, rats, small birds and frogs, as well as a great many insects. Many people dislike the Little Owl intensely, but it undoubtedly does more good than harm.

The nest is always in a hole, usually in a tree or a wall, though sometimes it is in the ground.



The Coal Tit

This is a common bird in both town and country gardens, and often comes to bird tables, but the Coal Tit is a little smaller than the very common Blue Tit. There are other tits with black caps and white cheeks, but you can always recognise the Coal Tit by its large, white patch at the back of the neck, as you can see in the picture.

Coal Tits eat a lot of insects, so they are useful to man. In winter they are particularly fond of nuts and fat placed on bird tables, and are even better at hanging upside down than Blue Tits.

The nest is always in a hole, and Coal Tits are fond of nest boxes.

The Corn Bunting

A dull brown bird, in size about half-way between a Sparrow and a Thrush, the Corn Bunting lives on farmlands and rough commons. It does not much like trees, but is very fond of sitting on telegraph wires, where you can usually tell it is a Corn Bunting, because all the time it sings a little jingling song without a tune.

Corn Buntings eat grain and grass seeds, and also a few insects, so they do some harm as well as good. In winter they gather into big flocks and raid the farmyards.

The nest is almost always on the ground, and the eggs have scrawly markings on them, which often look very much like handwriting.

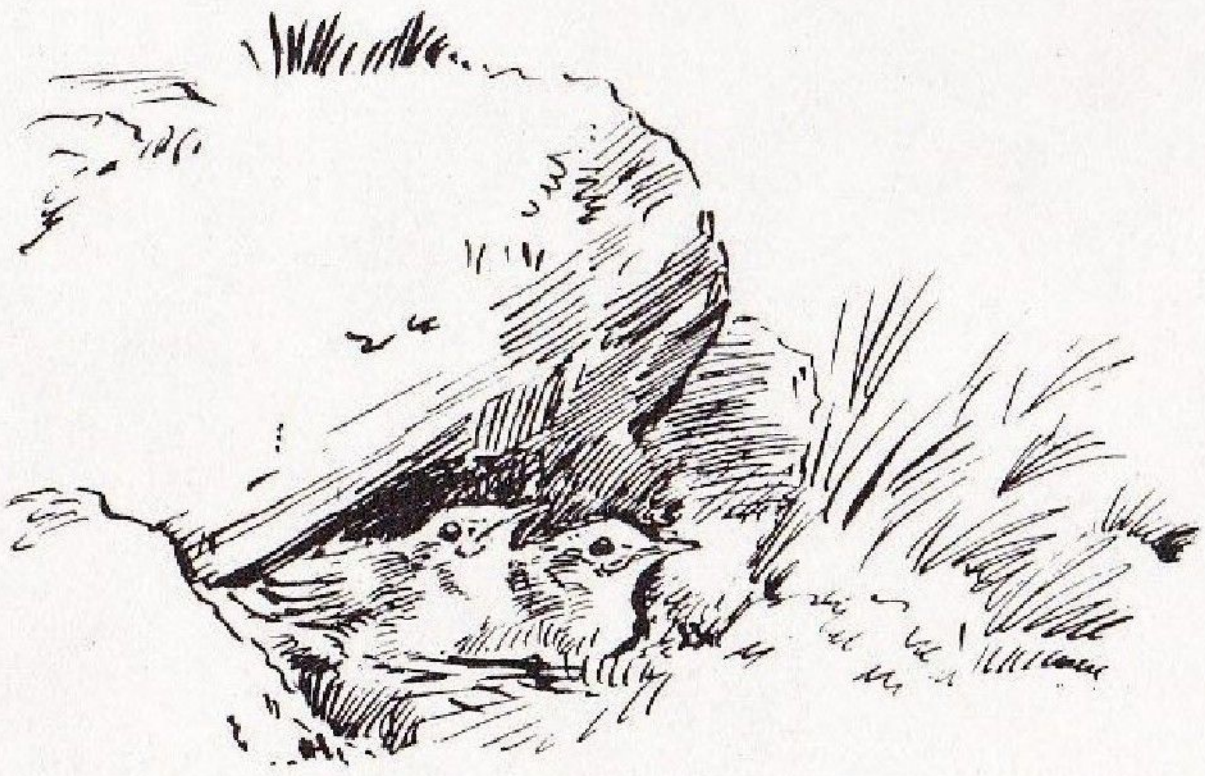
The Wheatear

Wheatears come to England from Africa just for the summer, and the first ones arrive in March. They are little birds about the same size as Sparrows.

In the picture, the Wheatear on the rock is the cock bird, and he is very easy to recognize, as he flits away from you, by the white patch above the tail. You will not see the Wheatear in a town, because it likes the open downland, rough common or hillsides, and in this kind of country it is quite common.

Wheatears eat insects and small worms, and so they are useful birds.

The nest is usually in a hole, and is not at all easy to find.



The Sedge Warbler

This little bird comes from Africa to spend the summer with us, living by the sides of ponds and rivers, and the denser the vegetation the happier it seems to be.

The Sedge Warbler climbs about the sedges, looking like a little, reddy-brown mouse, and does not fly very much. In fact, it is more often heard than seen, for its chattering song goes on all day long and a good part of the night, too. If you throw a stone into the sedges at night, all the Sedge Warblers will sing back at you.

Sedge Warblers eat only insects, more especially those that live near the water.

The nest is placed near the ground in thick cover.

The Reed Warbler

The Reed Warbler also comes to England from Africa for the summer months. It is much less common than the Sedge Warbler, because it likes reed-beds and osier-beds near water.

Reed Warblers spend most of their time climbing among the reeds, flying only occasionally and for very short distances, so they are not at all easy to see. The song is very like the Sedge Warbler's, though not so loud, but you can tell the birds apart by the Sedge Warbler's more noticeable light stripe over the eye.

You will need waders if you are going to look for a Reed Warbler's nest, because it likes to build this among reeds actually growing out of the water.

The Brambling

The Brambling is a finch, and comes to England from the far north for the winter. It is just the same shape as a Chaffinch, but you can tell the difference between these birds by the white patch above the Brambling's tail, which is noticeable in flight.

There are always plenty of Bramblings in the north of England during the winter, but how far south they come depends upon the coldness of the weather. A few Bramblings can usually be seen in the south of England, but in severe winters there are sometimes big flocks.

Bramblings eat seeds and berries, and they are very fond of beech nuts ; so the best place to look for them is near beech trees.

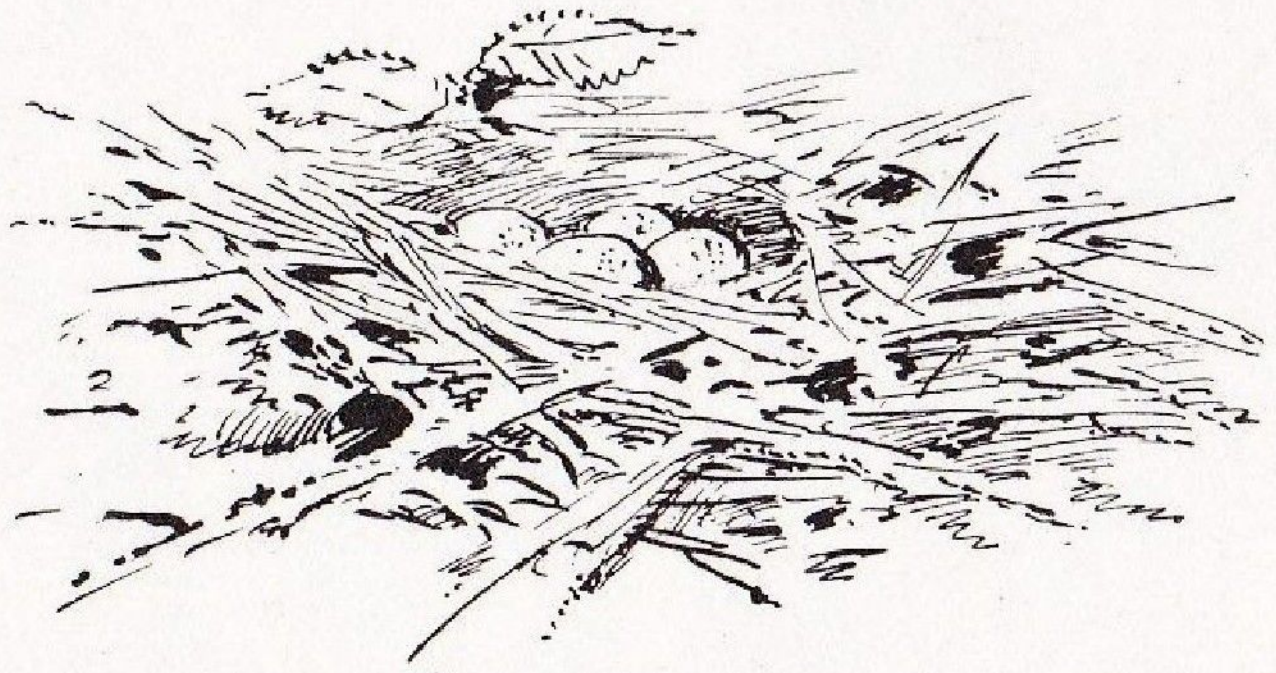
Being a winter visitor only, the Brambling does not, of course, nest in this country.

The Whitethroat

This is another bird that comes to England from Africa for the summer. The country name for the Whitethroat is the "Nettle-Creeper", and it is a very good one, too, for the Whitethroat likes thick hedge-rows with plenty of nettles and tall grasses, and it does not mind if the hedgerows are along the main roads.

Whitethroats eat insects, particularly caterpillars, and so are very useful little birds.

The nest is a flimsy affair, built on the ground or very close to it, and would be very difficult to find if the bird did not sing when you approach it. However, the White-throat always does and so gives it away.

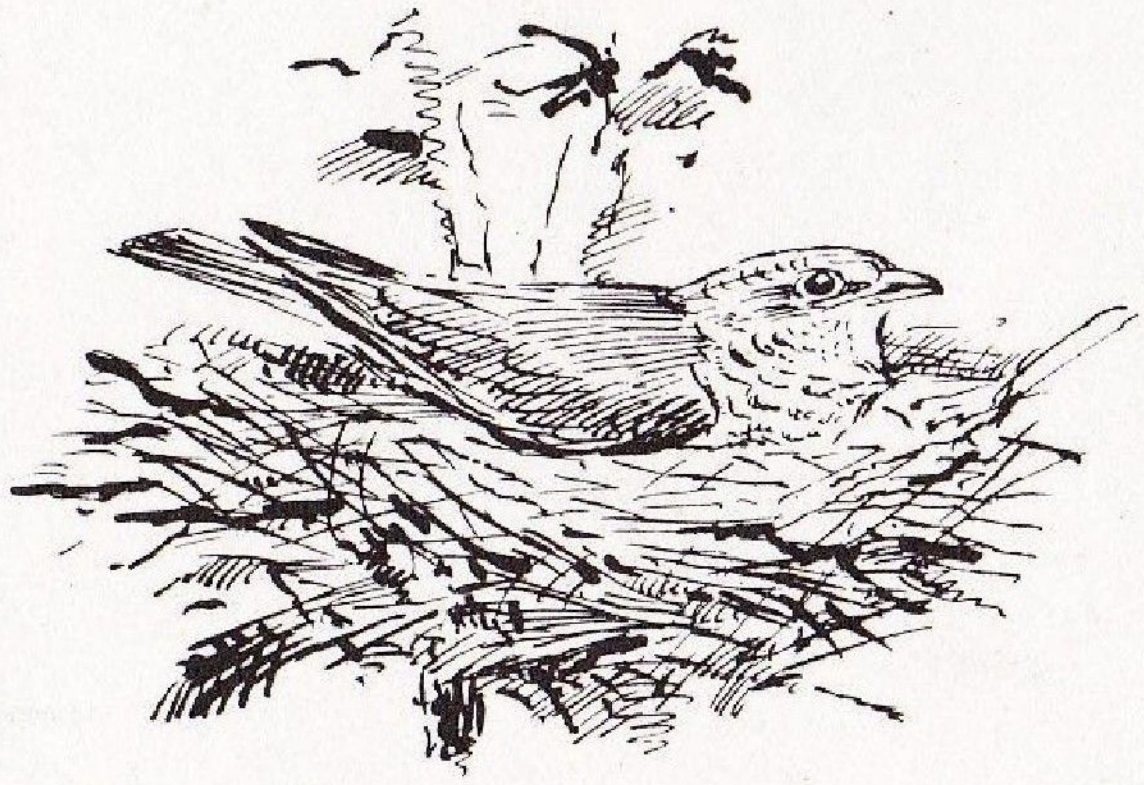


The Red-Backed Shrike

The Red-backed Shrike is also known as the "Butcher Bird", and is a summer visitor, arriving in May. It is a fierce little bird, but has a beautiful, soft warbling song, and is good at imitating the songs of other birds.

The Red-backed Shrike eats small birds and their young, also frogs, lizards, beetles and bumble bees. It often impales its kill on thorn bushes or barbed wire fences, and has particular places for doing this, which are known as its "larders".

The nest is quite large and neatly lined with hair or wool, and is usually placed in a thorn bush about four feet from the ground.



The House-Sparrow

You must know the House-Sparrow very well already, for it is a very common bird both in town and country, and is never found far away from buildings and cultivated land.

The House-Sparrow is a bold and cheeky bird, but very wary and difficult to approach closely. On farm land, the House-Sparrow is a nuisance, because it mainly eats corn ; but in towns and gardens it eats a great many insects. The picture shows three birds, two cocks and a hen, on farm land.

The untidy nest is usually built near or on a building (an ivy-covered wall being a favourite place), and there are generally three broods in a year.

The Tree-Sparrow

The Tree-Sparrow is very similar to the House-Sparrow, but has a bright brown cap and not a grey one, as you can see from the pictures. It is not nearly so common, and does not live so closely to houses and cultivated land. Unlike the House-Sparrow, it is a shy bird.

The Tree-Sparrow likes old trees in the hedgerows, or sometimes even in gardens, and usually builds its nest in the holes of these trees. It is particularly attracted by old willow trees. It eats insects, seeds, buds and fruit, and is very fond of a juicy spider.

In the winter, Tree-Sparrows join flocks of finches and buntings.

The Blackcap

The Blackcap is really a summer visitor, but if the weather is mild, it sometimes stays in England throughout the winter.

It likes country with trees and plenty of undergrowth, and so is often found in garden shrubberies. An active and lively little bird, the Blackcap has one of the most beautiful of all bird songs, which can be heard a long way off.

The Blackcap eats insects, fruit and berries. It is also fond of raspberries, straw-berries and currants, but does not really do a great deal of harm in a garden.

The nest is a very flimsy structure of dead grasses lined with hair, and is usually built about four feet from the ground, though sometimes much higher.

The Herring Gull

The Herring Gull is the commonest gull on our coasts, though it also comes inland to feed on farm fields, and may often be seen following the plough, when many grubs and worms are eaten.

It is a large and very powerful bird, with an enormous appetite. In seaside towns the Herring Gull raids the dustbins and begs bread from the visitors, but it also eats fish, small birds, rabbits and carrion. It will kill and eat big birds that are sick or wounded, and is a great stealer of other birds' eggs.

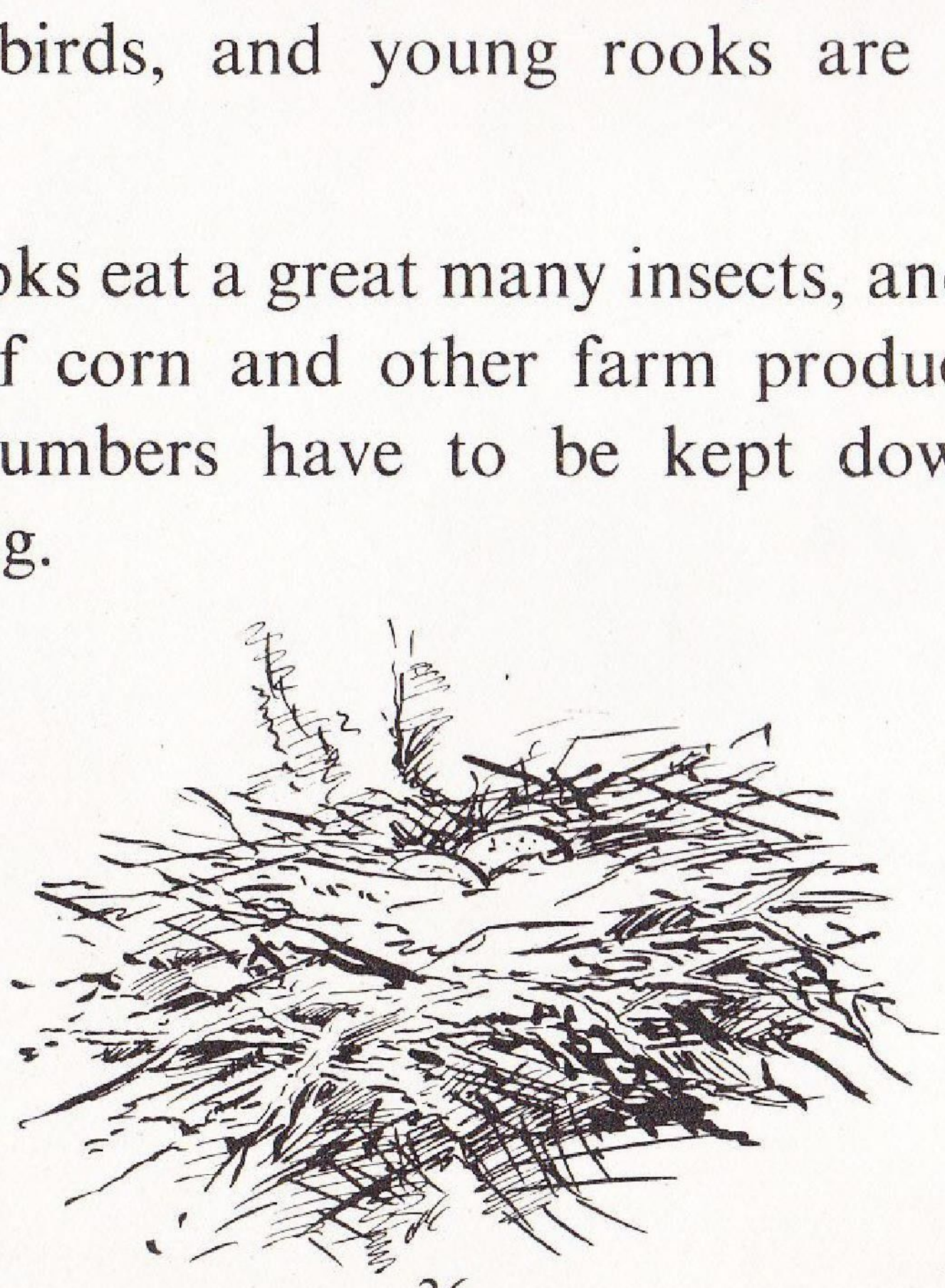
The Herring Gull builds a nest of grass and seaweed on a cliff ledge or the steeply sloping side of a cliff.

The Rook

This is another bird you must know very well, because there are rookeries even in the largest towns. You can readily tell a Rook from a Crow by the whitish patch, bare of feathers, at the base of the bill, whereas the Crow has an all-black face.

Rooks live in colonies and always nest in tall trees, using the same nests year after year, so there is no truth in the saying "that when Rooks build high it is going to be a fine summer". They are friendly, conversational birds, and young rooks are easily tamed.

Rooks eat a great many insects, and also a lot of corn and other farm produce, so their numbers have to be kept down by shooting.



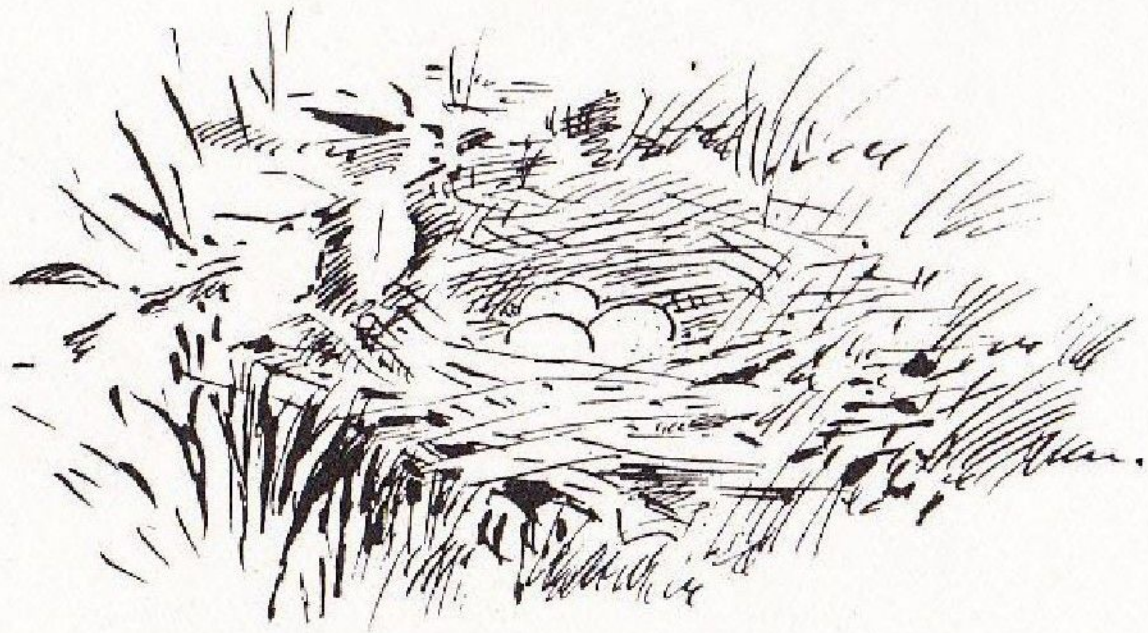
The Stonechat

The Stonechat loves commons with plenty of gorse bushes, also heaths and waste ground generally. Being partial to sea air, we are most likely to see it near the coast.

This bird is very easy to recognise, because the Stonechat likes to perch on the top of bushes, constantly spreading out its tail and flicking its wings while doing so.

The nest is built of moss and grass, and is usually placed on the ground at the foot of a gorse bush. The cock likes to perch on the top of a nearby bush or on telegraph wires, if there are any handy, to sing to its mate on the nest.

The food is almost entirely composed of insects.



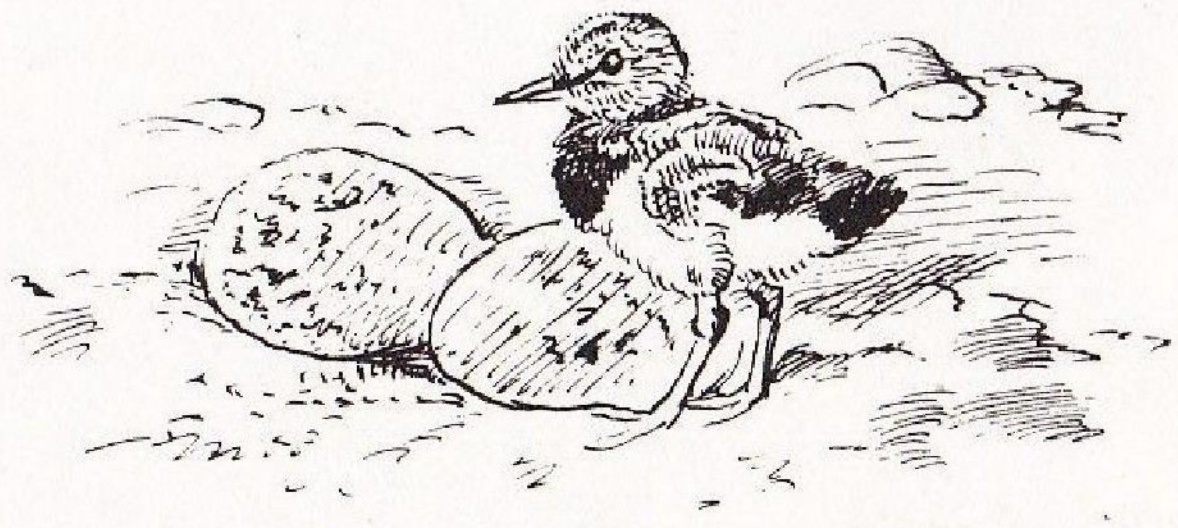
The Oyster-Catcher

Although this handsome bird is called the Oyster-Catcher, it certainly does not catch oysters. It is a bird of the seashore and tide's edge, and lives on the small shell-fish and little crabs that it finds there by probing with its powerful beak.

Oyster-Catchers are very noisy and excitable birds, strong fliers and good swimmers. When not disturbed, which is not often, they walk about most sedately.

The nest is just a hollow scraped in the shingle without any lining, and the eggs match the stones so well that they are very difficult to find.

Because of its truly pied black and white colouring, this bird is often called the Sea Pie.



The Swift

The Swift comes to England from South Africa for the summer. Although it looks rather like the Swallow it is really not related at all. The Swift has a shorter tail, very narrow wings and, except for a light patch on the chin, is very dark brown in colour.

Except when nesting or sleeping at night, the Swift spends its life on the wing, turning and gliding often at very great heights. You never see a Swift on the ground, because its long wings and short legs prevent it raising itself from a level surface.

The Swift eats only insects caught on the wing, and even drinks in flight—dipping to the surface of the water.

The nest is made of bits of straw and grass, and is placed in a hole under the eaves of a house, in the thatch, or in the face of a cliff.

The Goldcrest

The Goldcrest is the smallest British bird, and weighs only the same as an envelope and a half-sheet of notepaper. If you were to put one into an ordinary match-box, there would be plenty of room all round, although its tail might protrude.

This tiny bird is particularly fond of fir and pine woods, and will come into gardens where there are fir trees. The Goldcrest is very active, hopping from twig to twig as it feeds on insects, and hanging upside down like a tit. It does not mind being watched at all.

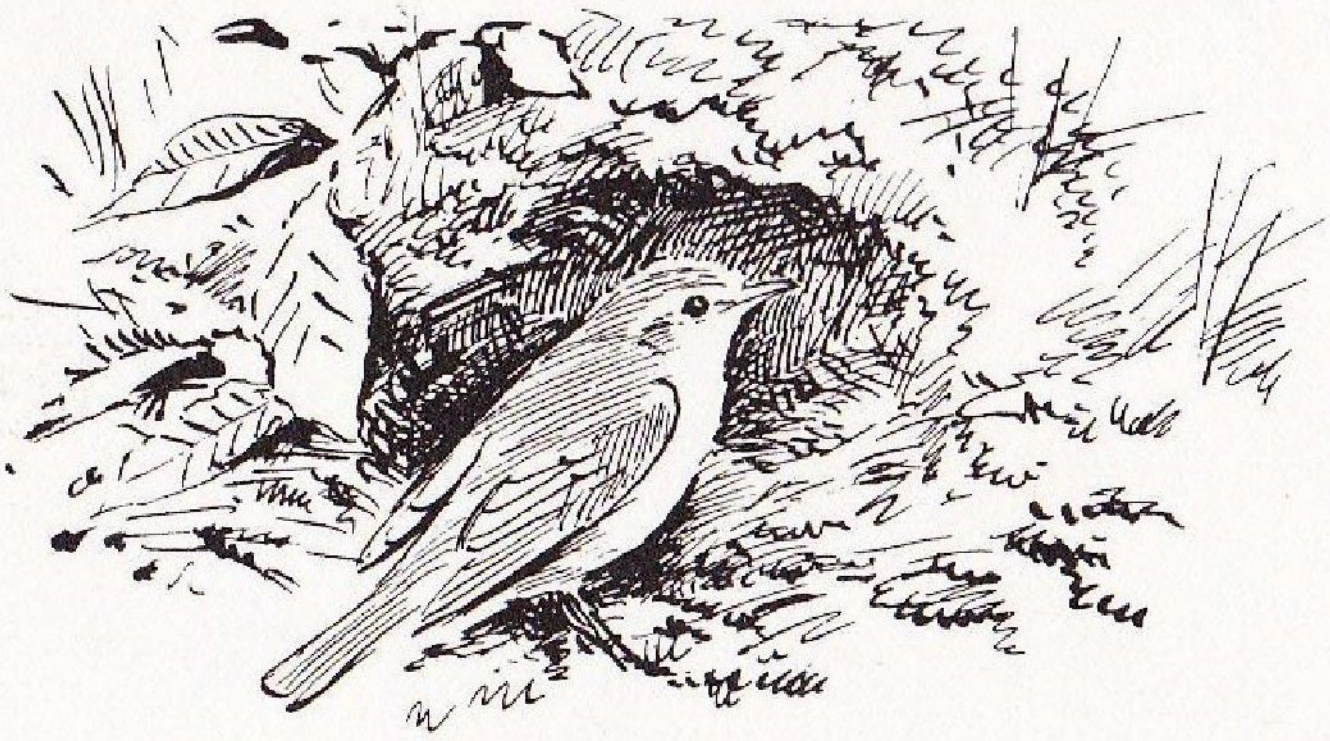
The nest is beautifully made of moss and spiders' webs, and is slung underneath the branch of a tree, usually at the end furthest from the trunk.

The Wood Warbler

Some people call this bird the Wood Wren. It is one of the "leaf-warblers," like the Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler (both illustrated in previous Ladybird books), and is so-called because it is just the same colouring as a leaf.

The Wood Warbler is a summer visitor, and likes well-wooded country, especially oak and beech woods, where it searches for small insects among the tree-tops. It is so similar to the Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler, that only an expert can tell them apart, but the Wood Warbler's song is quite different, and so is the nest.

It is a domed nest with a side entrance like the others, usually placed on a bank, but it never has any feathers in the lining.

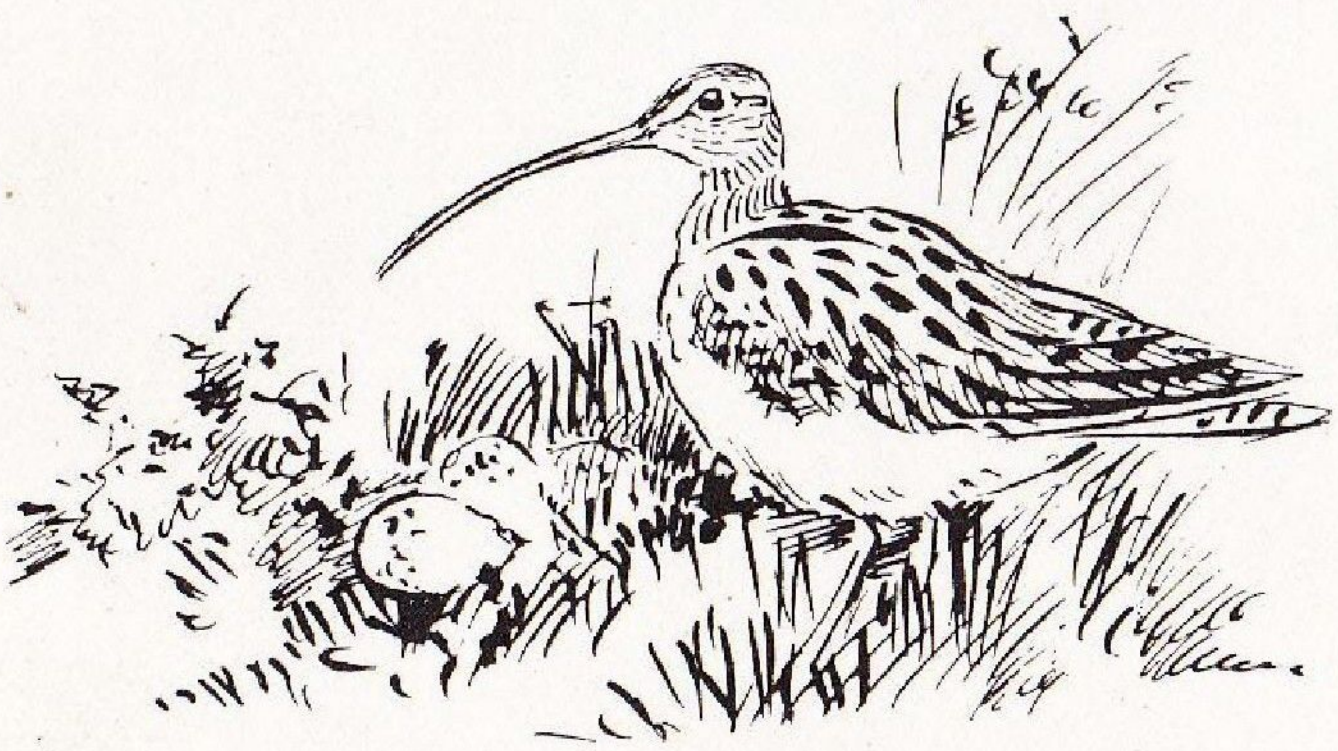


The Curlew

The Curlew gets its name from its call, which you must often have heard on the radio. It is a large bird with a long, curved beak, and in the winter lives on the seashore in large flocks. In the early summer, however, the Curlew nests on moors and bogs, or on hillside fields.

The nest, which is really only a few dead rushes or leaves scraped together, is usually placed amid coarse grasses or heather. It is not easy to find when the eggs are in it, but as soon as they hatch, the parents give the position away by their anxious cries as you approach.

Curlews eat worms, snails, insects and a few berries . . . and a few people eat Curlews.

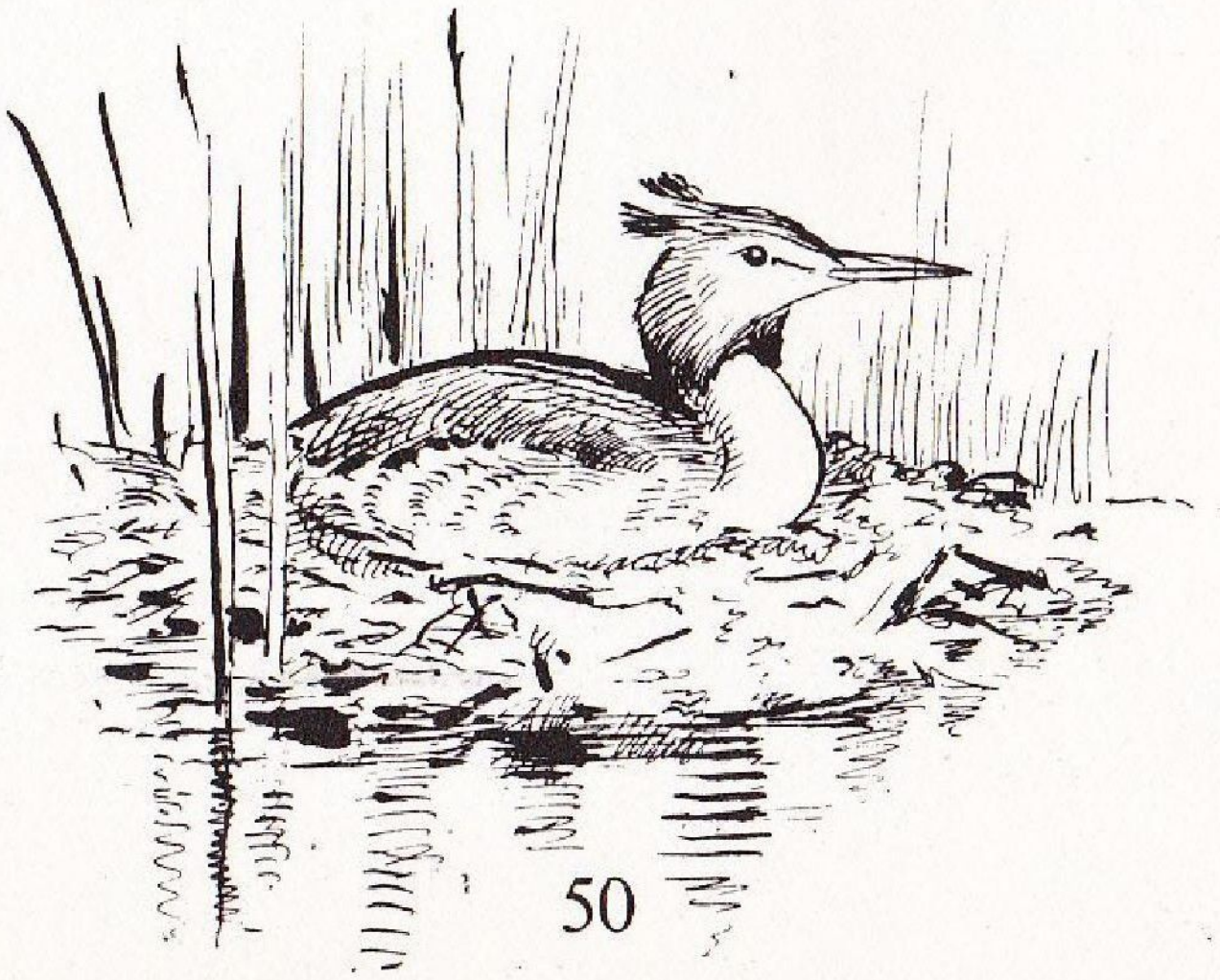


The Great Crested Grebe

The Great Crested Grebe (you can see the crest in the picture) is a bird of the lakes, reservoirs and large ponds. It flies very little, but is an expert diver, and can stay under the water for half-a-minute or more, swimming a long way as it searches for fish.

The nest is made of water weeds and is usually placed amongst growing reeds in the water. When the bird comes off the eggs to feed, she covers them over with weeds, so the eggs soon become stained and dirty.

The mother takes the very young chicks for rides on her back, but they can dive when only six weeks old, and by the time the chicks are ten weeks old they can look after themselves.



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The Birds' Eggs shown in the Coloured Plates are drawn to actual size.

There are also 48 other birds illustrated in Bird Books 1 and 2.